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ABSTRACT

Storytelling and folktales have a vital role in fostering children's understanding of the possibilities of language. In addition to bringing people together, the telling of stories and folktales provides listeners the opportunity to belong briefly to other cultures and other times, fosters young children's growth beyond their naturally egocentric interests, and exercises listeners' imaginations. Storytelling can promote children's reading skills, opening the expanse of written language beyond the strict deciphering of symbols on paper and bringing writing to life. The telling of tales is creative writing; each tale is written at the moment of its telling and must be of high quality to keep listeners' attention. Cumulative tales or chain tales are among the best selections for children, since they present some of the best attributes of folktales and storytelling. Hearing cumulative and other tales well told causes child listeners to seek in their reading and writing the same kinds of pleasure experienced while listening, fosters an appreciation for language, and helps to develop an "inner eye" and ear for writing and reading. (GT)

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STORYTELLING & CHILDREN: ENJOYMENT AND MUCH MORE

George W. B. Shannon

At one time no one knew of reading and film was as distant as the stars, yet people shared entertainment daily--shared tales of adventure, humor, fear and explanation. Folktales and storytelling were a major part of everyone's socialization--a way of learning and enjoying it.

In the present world of film, video and recordings of everything everywhere storytelling has as vital a place as ever. Perhaps more so. In telling a story orally the adult by his actions is saying "This is important to me. I am stopping everything else to share time and this tale I like with you." A tale told is something given directly to the listener. There are no pages, screens, or discs of plastic between teller and listener. If storytelling were to do nothing more than bring people together as such, it would be well worth its existence.

Storytelling does, however, provide much more. It is an art form as is the folktale. As such, they offer us our language in prime form and an opportunity to discover ourselves and our surroundings. Folktales provide a "literary geneology"--a link between people who are far and near both in time and space. Flags of nations change as frequently as do war-mongers and crop statistics are trivial. Facts are told, filed, and forgotten. The tales of a culture can be shared. They show customs, but most of all the concerns and mores of their society. They share laughter and fears.

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Telling folk and fariy tales is entertainment on one level, but certainly not an idle escape from reality. Storytelling provides instead a venture into reality--the reality of age old concerns and interactions that all encounter and learn with which to deal.

In the process of telling tales the opportunity exists to briefly belong to another culture--another time. Everytime RAPUNZEL is told the heart of the tale is the same. It is an experience shared between people of different centuries as well as those in the same room. Children today have few elements of their television world that are in common with their parent's childhoods, yet the folktales they may encounter are shared with the childhoods of distant relatives.

As an art form storytelling increases our awareness--acting as an artful and psychological microscope which allows us to examine ourselves. Storytelling and folktales heighten and refine experiences by helping us to see the tree through the forest. To listen to tales is to travel vicariously through all emotions and situations--a time to explore one's feelings. For the young child, tales foster a growth beyond his naturally egocentric interests. Through tales and imagination he comes to be disturbed by another's misfortunes and joyful at their happiness. He becomes a caring individual. The exploration and inner growth (best explained by Bruno Bettelheim in USES OF ENCHANTMENT) is apparent when a child asks for the same tale time and time again then suddenly wants it no more.

The child works and searches with the tale until he no longer needs it and then moves on to new concerns and discoveries.

The extension of the mind into worlds and events that are not immediately tangible is important in everyone's development. Imagination is vital in all areas. One must be able to see beyond the everyday--the present--in order to paint, sculpt, search for a cure for cancer, create a new recipe or figure out how to get to the moon. To listen to and tell stories is to travel in such worlds and an excercise for the imagination--for creativity.

Storytelling holds most for reading and writing for they share the same medium--language. Much of the world's finest literature was created by those who could neither read nor write. Language and literature came before writing and reading in social history, just as they continue to do so in every child's development. This pattern of evolution can be shared again via storytelling and strengthen the present.

While reading is taught, it is often difficult for children to move beyond the rote memory skill aspects of word identification and the sounding of syllables. To read well and for enjoyment one must be able to visualize and hear the words and events described. No one likes to listen to a monotone or watch a poorly made film. What is there to enjoy in reading if one reads in a monotone and sees little? Through listening and hopefully sharing tales one comes to hear the language--to give life to the words they read on paper. The reader in effect must produce his own film. As our

society becomes more and more oriented toward the visual we as individuals become less so. Some of the most requested books by children are those of films or television programs they have already seen. They can read such books with the images already set. They do not have to go about the craft of creating their own. With storytelling in the oral tradition there are no hand-delivered visuals to tell the listeners what to see--what to imagine. There is only the tale--the seed. The listener creates everything he sees. Each listener decides just what the castle looks like, how ugly the witch, how gory if at all the battle scene etc. As opposed to the prepackaged experiences of most film and television storytelling is forever individualized with the listener and teller in shared control.

Storytelling (listening and telling) opens for the reader the expanse of our written language beyond the strict deciphering of black symbols on pager. Writing has no extensive punctuation or manner of notation as does music that enables the reader to know much about the author's feelings--how he "heard" it while writing. A symphony is filled with notations which guide the musical reader with still opportunities left for interpretation. Far too many read along like plodding novice musicians with nothing but the bald flat notes to carry the tale. Storytelling is writing brought to life. Expression, sound, pacing and moments of quiet are experienced as part of language just as they are in music. What is not said bears t[illegible] value to what is said and how. These

variables are vital to storytelling and to creative enjoyable reading.

To tell a story is to write. Each time a teller tells a tale it must be written at that moment--formed and born with no erasing or checks with the dictionary for a "fancier" word. The skeleton of the tale is set, but the tale itself is born slightly anew each time it is told. In this sense, storytelling has similarities with jazz. All the possibilities must be known, the skills honed, but the writing is spontaneous and comes directly from the creator/writer. Too often "creative writing" is confused with seeing how many polysyllable words are used. Storytelling is not filled with excessive adjectives or other word-gymnastics, but rather lingual notes that can be strung together with care and pacing. Folktales are sparse in their style and to the bone--the base of fine literature and writing. Mollie Hunter, a Scottish author, has written of such "simple" words and style in TALEN IS NOT ENOUGH. The baser words--the language of the peasant "can be built smoothly and musically into the rhythmic sequence which is a natural setting for some bright, flashing fragment of poetry. This was the art of words as practised by the tellers of folktales..."*

To write a tale well on paper or for the ears is to verify the errors of the idea that that which appears to be simple is so. With only the basics--solid everyday language--the quality of the writing must be top-notch or the reader/listener walks away. One cannot forestall awareness of weakness with flowery padding. The

heart of the tale jumps to the forefront and the text of quality is acid quick. One learns patterns and rhythms that do succeed--that are of quality within that particular story. In telling and listening to tales again and again one not only hones that particular tale, but one's abilities to find the best patterns and flow of the sounds we recognize as words.

Although any tale may be told successfully on a one to one basis, selection is often a craft--the right story for the right time. Cummulative tales or chain tales are among the best selections for the youngest as well as older children. They present perhaps all the very best attributes of folktales and storytelling. They range in tenor from the riduculous (I KNOW AN OLD LADY) to the caring and joyful (THE MOUSE'S TAIL) to the deeper and puzzling (SNOW AND SUN). They present plenty of action and a rhythm that carries the tale along. With that pattern and flow comes a joy of language as situations and characters build one upon the other until the climax. As each situation enlarges the repetitive section of the tale grows and is repeated listeners may join in, mastering a new line each time they hear the tale. Requests for such tales to be told again are frequent for children are eager to increase their level of participation. They are eager to "play" with their language--to stretch their lingual world.

Hearing cummulative tales or any tales well told causes the child/listener to seek in his reading and writing the same kind of pleasure and enjoyment he experienced while listening. Literature

cannot really be taught. What can be transmitted, however, is an appreciation for--or atleast a fuller understanding of--the possibilities of language. Tales cannot be told as lessons to be dissected and quizzed. Didacticism kills tales just as surely as a tight fisted hold destroys the life of a butterfly. Tales must be told as a way of sharing truths, images and discoveries. Storytelling is a literary art that presents the best examples of its medium. It is the primary and oldest form of sharing literature. Just as one may foster an "eye" for the visual arts, so may one foster an "inner eye" and ear for writing and reading. Storytelling and folktales can lead the way. They are always there. It only takes someone of interest to utilize all they have to offer.

*Hunter, Mollie. TALENT IS NOT ENOUGH. NY: Harper & Row, 1976, p. 105.

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